

WILMINGTON, 1898: COMMERCE, CORRUPTION, AND CRIME

[In 1997, in anticipation of the activities commemorating the centennial of the racial violence in Wilmington, Chancellor James R. Leutze of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, posed three questions to the staff at Archives and History. The questions and answers prepared--respectively by Wilson Angley, Jerry L. Cross, and Michael Hill of the agency's Research Branch--follow.]

I. Was Wilmington in financial distress at the time of the riot; and, if so, was this unique to Wilmington?

As has long been the case, Wilmington's economy in the late 1890s was heavily dependent on trade and related maritime activity. The city's trade had rebounded quickly after the Civil War, with principal articles of commerce remaining largely the same. As before, chief export commodities were wood products, naval stores, and cotton. Overall, exports far exceeded imports in both tonnage and value, with many vessels arriving in ballast to receive their outward-bound cargoes.

By the 1890s, however, the composition of Wilmington's export trade had begun to change markedly. The naval stores market had collapsed in the early 1870s and had never fully recovered. By 1895 naval stores comprised a mere seven percent of total exports in terms of value. Lumber and wood products, while constituting a large part of total exports in terms of volume, were far less significant as sources of revenue. By 1895 they comprised only three percent of exports by value.

Compensating somewhat for the decline in naval stores and wood products was cotton, which became increasingly the mainstay of Wilmington's economy. Especially important was the foreign trade in cotton, which exceeded the value of domestic shipments by the 1880s. By 1895 cotton shipments comprised fully ninety percent of the total value of Wilmington's export commodities. Paramount in the export of cotton was the firm of Alexander Sprunt and Son.

Despite its importance, however, Wilmington's export trade in cotton was overshadowed by that of Charleston and Savannah, to say nothing of Galveston and New Orleans. Moreover, the shipment of cotton was unable to compensate fully for declines in wood products and naval stores, while creating a dangerous dependence on a single commodity. During the 1890s, Wilmington's export tonnage declined from 88,000 tons to 81,000. By the end of the decade, Wilmington's future as a major port appeared uncertain.

Wilmington's industrial expansion since the Civil War had been significant but not particularly impressive. The most noteworthy strides had been taken in cotton compressing and fertilizer production, both of which employed